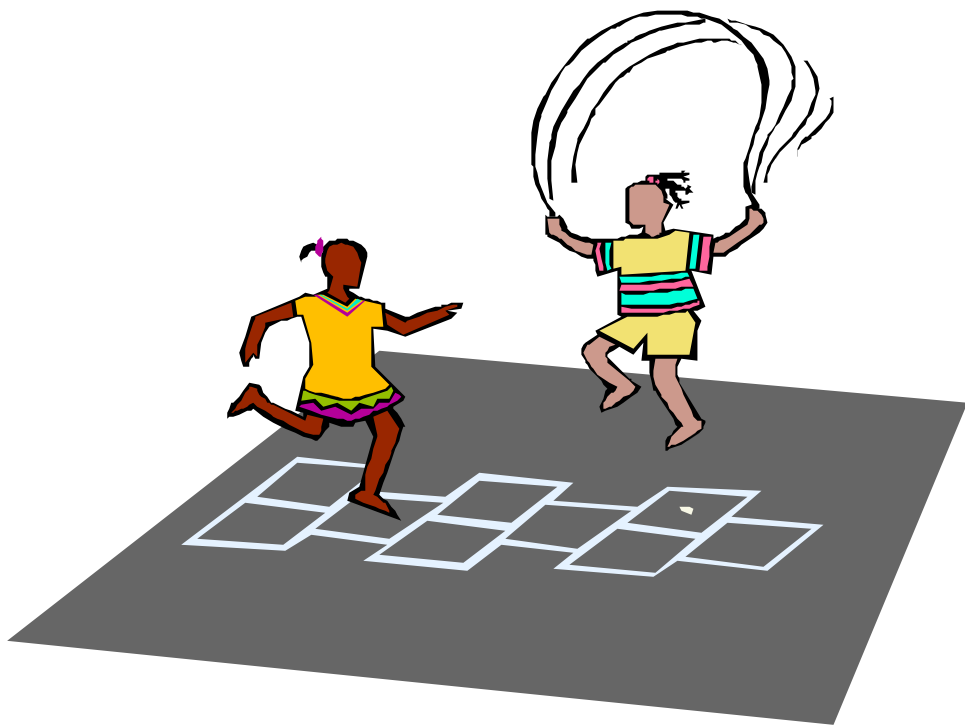


# CHANGING CHILDHOODS



## TREATS OF OLIVER TWIST'S GROWTH, EDUCATION AND BOARD

**F**or the next eight or ten months, Oliver was the victim of a systematic course of treachery and deception. He was brought up by the hand. The hungry and destitute situation of the infant orphan was duly reported by the workhouse authorities to the parish authorities. The parish authorities inquired with dignity of the workhouse authorities, whether there was no female then domiciled in "the house" who was in a situation to impart to Oliver Twist the consolation and nourishment of which he stood in need. The workhouse authorities replied with humility, that there was not. Upon this the parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be "farmed", or, in other words, that he should be dispatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny: quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them: thereby finding in the lowest depth a deeper still; and proving herself a very great experimental philosopher.

Everybody knows the story of another experimental philosopher, who had a great theory about a horse being able to live without eating, and who demonstrated it so well, that he got his own horse down to a straw a day, and would most unquestionably have rendered him a very spirited and rampacious animal on nothing at all, if he had not died, just four-and-twenty hours before he was to have had his first comfortable bait of air. Unfortunately for the experimental philosophy of the female to whose protecting care Oliver Twist was delivered over, a similar result usually attended the operation of her system; for at the very moment when a child had contrived to exist upon the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food, it did perversely happen in eight and a half cases out of ten, either that it sickened from want and cold, or fell into the fire from neglect, or got half-smothered by accident; in any one of which cases, the miserable little being was usually summoned into another

world, and there gathered to the fathers which it had never known in this.

Occasionally, when there was some more than usually interesting inquest upon a parish child who had been overlooked in turning up a bedstead, or inadvertently scalded to death when there happened to be a washing - though the latter accident was very scarce, anything approaching to a washing being of rare occurrence in the farm - the jury would take it into their heads to ask troublesome questions, or the parishioners would rebelliously affix their signatures to a remonstrance. But these impertinences were speedily checked by the evidence of the surgeon, and the testimony of the beadle; the former of whom had always opened the body and found nothing inside (which was very probable indeed), and the latter of whom invariably swore whatever the parish wanted (which was very self-devotional). Besides, the board made periodical pilgrimages to the farm, and always sent the beadle the day before, to say they were going. The children were neat and clean to behold when they went; and what more would the people have.

It cannot be expected that this system of farming would produce any very extraordinary or luxuriant crop.



# Robert Owen

## 1771 – 1858

*“The children are most cruelly beaten with a horsewhip, strap, stick, hammer, handle, file or whatever tool is nearest to hand, or are struck with the clenched fist or kicked.”*

This former factory worker’s shocking evidence to a government inquiry described the way child factory workers were treated during the Industrial Revolution. Most poor British children at that time did not attend school, but worked for up to seventeen hours a day in dangerous and unhealthy factories for very low wages.



However, some factory owners were shocked at the way in which both children and adult workers were treated. Robert Owen spent his life fighting for improvement to help the poor.

At the age of nine, Owen left school and moved to Manchester, where he worked as a shop assistant. He learnt what it was like to work hard for long hours and low wages, but by the age of nineteen he had risen to be in charge of a cotton mill. He then married Caroline Dale, whose father owned an important spinning mill at New Lanark, Scotland. Soon Owen was manager of the mill.

Owen was determined to prove that he could treat his workers well and still make a profit. He built good houses and set up a cheap shop for them. His most popular act was to reduce the hours they had to work.

Politicians and writers went to see the factory. Owen told them:

*“It does not appear to me necessary for children to be employed under ten years of age in any regular work. I instruct them and give them exercise.”*

His greatest success came when he set up a school. Owen would not allow **corporal punishment** to be used. For the very young children, he started the first infants’ school in Britain.

Owen knew that other factory owners disliked him, because their workers wanted to be treated well. He tried to get Parliament to pass laws that would stop all children from working in factories.

Owen thought that people would be happier if they helped each other. In the U.S.A., he tried to set up New Harmony, a village where everyone

shared the work and the food equally. Sadly, quarrels broke out and his idea failed. But his son, also called Robert, became a US politician, supporting free schools for children, women's rights and an end to slavery.

For the rest of his life, Robert Owen supported **trade unions** and the **co-operative movement**. His ideas were very advanced for his time. He is more famous for what he tried to do than what he achieved, because many people did not share his views. Gradually, however, the employment of children was brought to an end.

#### DATE CHART

1771

Owen is born in Newton, Wales.

1799

Marries Caroline Dale, daughter of the owner of the New Lanark spinning mill in Scotland.

1800

Begins the New Lanark "experiment".

1824-28

Tries to set up his New Harmony community in the U.S.A.

1832 – 1858

Actively promotes the trade union and co-operative movement.

1858

17 November: dies in Newtown.

# Billy

Ironically, Billy's very earliest memory is one of being terrified by a circle of light. Until he was three years old, he and his beloved sister Florence slept in a curtained-off alcove in the kitchen. One evening she aimed a mirror reflection onto the wall, allowing it to pirouette and chase him until he screamed for mercy.

He had been born right next to that alcove on the kitchen floor, all eleven pounds of him plopping out onto freezing linoleum. The rage that followed this unceremonious introduction to the world has never left him, although it was a serendipitous launching for a future enemy of the bourgeoisie. For eight months he nestled in a wooden drawer with not one Fisher-Price contraption in sight.

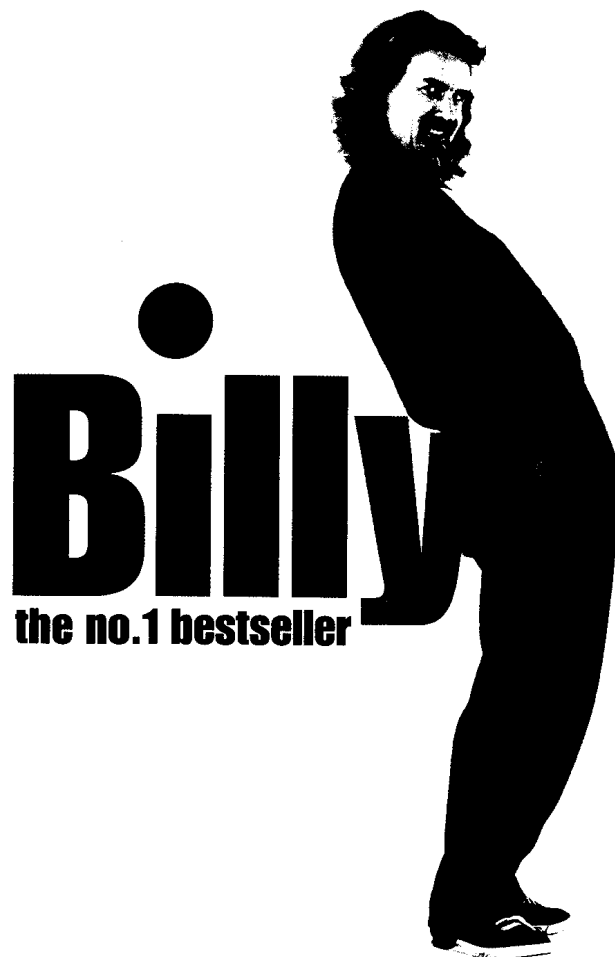
His family's living arrangements were similar to those of thousands of other inhabitants of Glasgow, a city that had come to be defined by row upon row of late-nineteenth-century apartment buildings known as "the tenements". These fine architectural soldiers had originally been created by Glasgow's Improvement Trust, as model housing for working-class families. But the time the Connollys moved into half of the third floor of 65 Dover Street in Anderston, many of them had deteriorated into rotting slums that would need more than a spot of paint to "take the bad look off them," as Billy would say.

The classically derived elevations in red or yellow sandstone were usually pleasant enough, but the interiors were thoroughly depressing. A dingy central staircase, stinking of cabbage and cat piss, spiralled upwards to the flats. Two or more poky apartments were squeezed into each floor, usually with just two rooms apiece, and a communal lavatory out on the landing. Some families were lumbered with the "coffin end" or corner apartment, which was even smaller than the rest.

The buildings themselves butted right onto the street and were usually entered via an interior alleyway known as a close. The "Wally" closes, as some were called, were beautifully tiled halfway up the wall, with a leafy motif running along the top. Such finery, however, ended abruptly at the threshold of a darker, often treacherous, tunnel known as the "dunny" (short for dungeon), that dead-ended in an enclosed rear courtyard, itself a veritable assault-course of broken bicycles, flapping knickers, and reeking middens.

Considering it now through a haze of nostalgia, Billy says the Glasgow tenement is a New York brownstone without a fire escape. Some

of the buildings certainly had grandeur and, like their New York counterparts, are now sought after by the well-to-do. Billy's first home was not one of those. The Dover Street flat had only two rooms: a kitchen-living room, with a niche where the children slept, and another room for their parents. The entire family bathed in the kitchen sink and there was no hot water at all. As an enduring legacy of his early cramped existence, Billy is now quite uncomfortable in large living spaces. He sighs over the phone to me from fabulous hotels all over the world: "They've gone and upgraded me again. Bloody Presidential Suite this time."



**PAMELA STEPHENSON**

Extract from Billy by Pamela Stephenson.